

## ***Fast Food to Go - Sermon Based on Exodus 12:1-14***

by David Hindman on Sunday, September 4, 2011

A friend at William and Mary used to say, “A whole lot of dumb happens on freshman halls.” Some of you R-MC freshmen may already know that to be true here, too.

Apparently a whole lot of dumb happens with Egypt’s Pharaoh, too. This week I re-read the stories in Exodus of the plagues brought by God against the Egyptians that lead up to today’s story of Passover: the Nile turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness. Each disaster provides yet another opportunity for Pharaoh to relent and let God’s people go; each time Pharaoh refuses. And I thought, “Can anyone really be this stubborn and stupid?” And then I remembered the words of Frederick Douglass, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” Even when power is slipping away and the battle is really over, those clinging to power really can be incredibly stupid and stubborn. Think of Adolph Hitler hunkered in his command post in Berlin giving commands to non-existent divisions even as Russian and American troops crush the final feeble resistance. Think this spring of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak ridiculous confidence in the face of the revolution taking place in Tahir Square, or Colonel Qaddafi in Libya pathetic and almost comical defiance still, or Syrian President Assad clinging to power when his days are clearly numbered. Power concedes nothing, then, now, or in the future.

The story rings true. But there's more to the story. There's a certain storyteller's quality to the tale of the plagues with patterned repetition and ever increasing tension, almost to the breaking point, as the suspense builds. And the point of the story? To teach the children and the next generation how awesome and powerful is the God who cares for the Hebrews. As the story's told year after year it gets inside the young. They develop a particular picture of God They begin to understand life and reality in a particular way. One description of the impending locust assault puts it this way, "The Lord said to Moses, 'I have made the king and his officials stubborn, in order that I may perform these miracles among them and in order that you may be able to tell your children and grandchildren how I made fools of the Egyptians when I performed the miracles. All of you will know that I am the Lord.'" Pharaoh thinks he has power; he's really a plaything and a toy in the hands of the One true Power. Listen to the story year after year and you learn how awesome this mighty God is. Slowly you realize that those who think they're powerfully in charge are fools. Hear the story often enough and you know Pharaohs and presidents and prime ministers aren't nearly as awesome as they think they are.

That's why we need to gather for worship and read scripture, too. We don't do these things to earn divine brownie points or because that's what nice church folks do. In worship we're reminded of what we might otherwise forget. We read these stories to get another perspective on reality. In worship these stories begin to shape and define us. Eventually we live knowing a different story with a different vision of the world and another set of values and priorities. We live lightly in the world and we take less

seriously those who think they have the power. Listen to these old, old stories long enough and after awhile they change how we see the present and our future. In their time African American slaves found courage and inspiration in these stories of a God saying, “Let my people go!” And they realized that if God could free Hebrew slaves in Egypt God could do the same in Virginia or Mississippi. Scripture’s stories were well known to the underground Confessing Church in Nazi Germany and so they learned they could say, “We have only one Fuehrer and he is Jesus Christ.” These stories don’t just entertain or report the past. They empower and point us to a future not yet born – a future of justice and deliverance for those who suffer now, but will not suffer for ever.

What do the stories teach? That there’s a power greater than any worldly power at the heart of the universe. That greater power is passionate for justice and freedom for the weak who count for nothing in this world. Sometimes worldly powers and principalities have to be humbled and turned into divine playthings in the hand of that great power just to prove where true power lies. So the story becomes a cautionary tale for us living in the world’s last great superpower. If we become stubborn and resistant to events breathing freedom for others and find ourselves losing our grip on familiar power, listen to scripture’s soft persistent whisper, “Remember the stories; consider how they end; do not be as stupid and stubborn as Pharaoh.”

And we learn this sobering truth: the God of Exodus plays favorites. That God is a fierce Mamma Bear when her favorites are threatened. Throughout scripture God sides with the oppressed: the weak, those without a voice in the halls of power, the orphan and

the widow and the poor. God's their fierce ally and advocate because God's belly burns for justice and what's right and fair for them. And the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps will not rest until justice and freedom come. We may read the Passover story and think God's cruelly unfair to cause the death of those Egyptian first born. But remember: Israel is God's favorite first-born. Remember Pharaoh's curse directed toward every innocent Hebrew boy. Pharaoh's evil will is turned back by God's power onto itself. Deliverance and freedom cost those seeking it and it costs those standing in the way. The stubbornly stupid resist this protective Momma Bear God who sides with the weak; the truly wise stand with the poor and forgotten because they are dearest to God's heart. That's an important lesson for us living in a superpower nation tempted to write off the poor to protect our privileges and power.

The Exodus tale tells us this: injustice has no future; the death of the firstborn Egyptians proves that. The future's with the poor and oppressed with this divine and holy Power always on their side. The truly wise will make God's future and passion our own as well.

God indeed chooses sides and protects those God chooses. The Hebrews eat in peace and confidence. They know they're under God's care. The angel of death will pass over them without disturbance in the chaotic midnight dark. So we listeners to the tale can trust and believe that we live under God's care as well. No matter what life brings, nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love – not a disaster, not an F

in a course, not a loss of love or a job. God's care is enough to bring life and victory out of every death and disappointment.

That doesn't mean we can rest easy or assume we're immune from life's challenges. The Hebrews eat the meal on the run, ready to go at a moment's notice. They are God's faithful servants obeying God's instructions and heeding God's ways, but their lives still hang in the balance. Even with God on their side life's fraught with danger and risk. There's always the possibility of disaster as well as freedom. That's why faith is fragile and precarious: every moment of life and each opportunity for deliverance hangs by a thread. But that thread's held in the fingers of a most excellent seamstress and savior.

Listen to the story. Learn the difference between dumb and wise, life and death. The story's from the past but its power shapes present and future with hope. In his Intro to Old Testament class Ira Andrews used to quote an ancient Jewish text in discussions of Passover and the Exodus to freedom, "Our ancestors passed through the Red Sea and our feet got wet." The old, old story encourages us as we face whatever enslaves us or when we see the poor and oppressed so hard they cannot stand. God still delivers. God still saves. Thanks be to God.